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LOW MAINTENANCE LANDSCAPE PLANTS

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Traditionally, the lawn has been an essential part of the home landscape. It provides recreational opportunities for both children and adults, as well as adding to the overall harmony of the home environment and its design. However, as the landscape matures, certain problems may arise; mature trees shade areas to the detriment of grasses; banks dry out, thus encouraging weed establishment; and mowing turf becomes an endless chore.

What are the alternatives? Paving the offending areas would be detrimental to trees, and may not be aesthetically pleasing. One solution is to plant vegetation that requires little or no ongoing care. Although low maintenance plants are a popular solution, they must be selected with care.

Low maintenance plants may be shrubs, evergreens, vines or herbaceous perennials and are not restricted to any particular grouping of plants. The preservation of natural bush areas on rural and suburban lots is one example of low maintenance vegetation that requires relatively little care.

Not only do low maintenance plants suppress weeds, recycle nutrients, conserve moisture and prevent soil erosion, they also contribute to landscape design in their variety of forms, textures and colors. When selecting plants, consider their ease of establishment, tenacity to survive, the design functions required, the ease of propagation and the availability of the plants from trade sources.

An evaluation of the area where grass is difficult to grow and cut must be conducted. Prime targets for low maintenance plants are often steep banks, or areas in heavy shade under mature trees and shrubs which require extensive hand trimming. In such areas, the choice of plants will depend upon soil conditions, pH, exposure to the elements and sun or shade duration (see plant lists).

Economy and size of the area to be revegetated may also limit plant choice. For instance, on a large property a wildflower seed mixture will provide relatively cheap cover, whereas a small area in shade can be planted with a number of shade tolerant plants at minimal distances. The former example will require cultivation, seeding and minimal maintenance to establish; the latter will require cultivation, extensive weed control, mulch and irrigation until the plants are large enough to suppress weeds.

To help establish low maintenance plants, it is essential that perennial weeds be eliminated, since weeds may compete and dominate the chosen plant. Weeds such as quackgrass and bindweed are persistent perennials that are impossible to eradicate in established plantings.

Figure 1. Goutweed, well-established as a ground cover in heavy shade under mature Norway Spruce.

Prior to planting, cultivate the area frequently to destroy weeds, or use a chemical eradicant that can penetrate the weed roots to eliminate infestation. To avoid erosion problems, the latter process is effective for banks since the chemical kills grasses and weeds, but leaves the dead roots and crowns in place. Holes can then be dug, plants inserted, watered and mulched with bark or wood chips (which also controls erosion and conserves moisture on these dry sites). Within three to four years, the plants will be established and take over the function of turf.

Of the low maintenance plants listed, the shrub is often wrongfully ignored. A few shrubs can cover a large area at a cost that is relatively inexpensive.

For large areas, a mixture of trees and shrubs can provide all the design criteria of texture, color and form required in today's landscape.

Evergreens, particularly the spreading types, are extensively used since they can tolerate hot, sunny sites, provide winter texture and color, and are relatively free of insects and disease. However, they are slow to fill in and expensive to purchase.

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Between the inexpensive shrub and the expensive evergreen lies a range of plants that can be classified as ground cover. These plants may be broad-leaved evergreens (e.g., Wintercreeper), low-growing shrubs (e.g., Cotoneaster), or herbaceous perennials, (e.g.,Creeping Cinquefoil).

To be successful, such plants should generally grow to a minimum height of 15 cm. in order to suppress weeds, be able to fill in quickly and be easy to propagate. A number of good ground covers, evergreens and shrubs are listed below.

Figure 2. Ground covers selected for color and texture. In the foreground two year old Coral beauty cotoneaster adjacent to recently planted Moss phlox and Soapwort in the distance.

The planting of low maintenance material can commence as soon as the soil is frost-free and continue with certain reservations throughout the summer months into the fall. In early spring all vegetation, whether it be bare-root, ball and burlapped or grown in containers, can be transplanted into open soil. Holes are dug with a trowel and the plant inserted no deeper than it grew in the nursery; it should be well firmed in, to ensure root and soil contact, then watered thoroughly.

During the summer months plants should be moved balled and burlapped or by the container grown method to ensure minimum root disturbance and maximum establishment during hot, dry weather. Later in the fall all methods can be used; however, on windy exposed sites, delay planting until spring.

Mulches of wood chips, bark or compost may be spread over the planted area to conserve moisture, control soil temperatures, and to some extent suppress weeds. Weeds must be controlled, generally by hoeing to reduce competition for soil moisture. Watering is a must during periods of drought.

Within a few years ground covers will suppress weeds and provide the texture and color required. Occasionally trimming and insect and disease control may be required. Fertilizer can be applied once in the spring at similar rates used for lawns.

The following lists are in two sections: first evergreen, shrub and vine ground covers; secondly, herbaceous ground covers. Height and spread refers to mature size; hardiness zone is taken from the Agriculture Canada hardiness zone map, which is found in most nursery catalogues.

Finally, comments that include the inherent nature of the plant are listed to help in the selection of ground covers for specific locations. For example, "invasive" indicates that the plant may be difficult to eradicate in a residential setting.

SELECTED LIST OF SHRUBS AND VINES

Name	Hardiness Zone	Height x Spread	Comments
Caragana aurantiaca Pygmy Peashrub	2	60 x 60 cm	Mound, narrow green leaves, yellow pea-like flowers, full sun.
Celastrus scandens American Bittersweet	3b	1 x 2 m	Native vine, pale green leaves, orange-yellow berries, full sun, excellent on banks.
Chaenomeles japonica Japanese Quince	5b	1 x 1.5 m	Mound, glossy green leaves, orange-red flowers, edible fruit, full sun. Cvs. C. nivalis (white flowers), C. Fire-Dance (red flowers).
Cotoneaster dammeri 'Skogholm' Skogholm Cotoneaster	5	30 x 100 cm	Mound, small green leaves, pink flowers, excellent on banks in full sun. Cvs. C. Coral Beauty, (red berries).
Deutzia gracilis Slender Deutzia	6	1 x 1.3 m	Mound, pale green leaves, white flowers, full sun, well-drained soils. Cvs. D. lemoine compacta, D. rosea (Pink flowers).
Euonymus fortunei Winter Creeper	5	20 x 100 cm	Vine-like spreader, glossy evergreen leaves, good in full sun to shade. Cvs. E. coloratus (leaves plum colour in fall)
Forsythia i. 'Arnold' Arnold Dwarf Forsythia	5	1 x 2 m	Mound, pale green leaves, yellow flowers, excellent for sunny, dry banks.
Genista tinctoria Dyers Broom	5	30 x 45 cm	Mound, small green leaves, yellow flowers, full sun in well-drained soils. Cvs. G. Lydia, G. Vancouver Gold.
Hedera helix Baltica Baltic English Ivy	6	22 x 45 cm	Vine, evergreen glossy leaves, shade loving. Cvs. H. Thorndale, H. Bulgaria.
Hydrangea a. petiolaris Climbing Hydrangea	5	.6 x 2 m	Vine, large green leaves, white flowers, partial sun to shade.
Iberis sempervirens Candy tuft	5	30 x 30 cm	Carpet, narrow dark green leaves, white flowers, sun in well-drained soils.
Juniperus Spreading Junipers	2	1 x 1.2 m	Mound or spreaders, grey, green, blue or gold needles, full sun in well-drained soils, numerous cvs.
Lonicera Honeysuckle	2	1 x 2 m	Vines, smooth green leaves, orange trumpet flowers, good for banks in sun or partial shade. Cvs. L. Goldflame (4), L. halliana (6b).
Mahonia aquifolium Oregon Grape	5	1 x 1 m	Mound, glossy evergreen leaves, yellow flowers, winter bums prefers shade. Cvs. M. Forest Green, M. Woodland King, M. Woodland Queen.
Pachysandra terminalis Japanese Spurge	3	25 x 30 cm	Spreader, glossy evergreen leaves, shade loving.
Parthenocissus Virginia Creeper Boston Ivy	2b/5b	.3 x 2 m	Native vines, green leaves red in fall, sun or shade.
Pinus mugo Mugho Pine	1	1 x 1.2 m	Mound, dark everygreen needles, dry, sunny sites.
Potentilla Shrubby Cinquefoil	1	1 x 1 m	Mound, pale green leaves, bright yellow flowers, excellent for dry, sunny banks. Cvs. P. Klondike, P. Sutter's Gold, P. Katherine Dykes.
Rhus aromatica Fragrant Sumac	3	1.5 x 2 m	Mound, divided green leaves, scarlet in fall, excellent for dry sunny sites. Cvs. R. Grow-Low, compact type.
Rosa Bush Roses	2	1.2 x 1.2 m	Mound, green rugose leaves, white-red flowers, sunny well-drained sites. Cvs. R. rugosa Max Graf (red), Alba (white).
Salix p. Gracilis Blue Arctic Willow	2b	1 x 2 m	Mound, narrow grey-green leaves, wet moist soils in full sun.
Spiraea Spirea	2b	60 x 100 cm	Mound, small green leaves, white-pink flowers, full sun, well-drained soils. Cvs. S. Snowhite (white flowers), S. Anthony Waterer (rose flowers).
Symphoricarpos c. Hancockii Hancock Coralberry	5	1 x 2 m	Spreader, dark green leaves, pink flowers, rose fruit, excellent for sunny banks, and partial shade.
Taxus Yews	4	1 x 1 m	Mound, narrow evergreen needles, good in shade to partial sun. Cvs. T. media Andersonii, T. media Brownii.
Viburnum o. nanum Dwarf European Cranberry	2b	60 x 60 cm	Mound, medium green leaves, sun or shade on well-drained soils.
Vinca minor Periwinkle	3	30 x 30 cm	Carpet, glossy everygreen leaves, white-purple flowers. shade lover. Cvs. V. Bowles (Blue flowers), V. Alba (white flowers), V. rubrum (red flowers).

LEGEND: Cvs. - cultivars

SELECTED LIST OF HERBACEOUS PERENNIALS

Name	Hardiness Zone	Height x Spread	Comments
Achillea Yarrow	2	20 x 60 cm	Mound, feathery light green leaves, yellow flowers, full sun, dry sites. Cvs. A. Kelwayi (cerise flowers).
Aegopodium podagraria Goutweed	3	30 x 60 cm	Spreader, dark green leaves, shade loving, invasive. Cvs. A. p. variegata, green and white leaves.
Ajuga reptans Bugleweed	5	7.5 x 30 cm	Spreader, shiny green leaves, blue flowers, shade lover. Cvs. A. variegata (green and white leaves), A atropurpurea (purple leaves).
Aurinia saxatile Basket-of-Gold	5	.3 x 1 m	Mound, grey green leaves, bright yellow flowers, full sun, well-drained sites. Cvs. A. citrinum (Lemon yellow flowers), A. compactum.
Arabis alpina Rock-cress	4	15 x 45 cm	Spreader, grey-green leaves, white flowers, dry, sunny, well-drained soils. Cvs. A. rosea (pink flowers), A. flore-plena (double white).
Artemisia Silver Mound Silver Mound Artemisia	4	20 x 60 cm	Mound, feathery silver leaves, sunny, well-drained soils.
Galium odoratum Sweet Woodruff	4	15 x 30 cm	Spreader, light green leaves, aromatic, white flowers, excellent ground cover for shade.
Asarum canadense Wild Ginger	4	15 x 30 cm	Spreader, green heart-shaped leaves, native ground cover for heavy shade.
Aubrieta deltoidea Purple Rock-cress	4	20 x 30 cm	Carpet, grey-green leaves, red-purple flowers, alpine for sunny, well-drained sites.
Bergenia cordifolia Bergenia	5	30 x 60 cm	Mound, glossy, green leaves, rose flowers, moist, shady locations. Cvs. B. Perfecta (Pink flowers), B. Silverlight (White flowers).
Campanula Bellflower	4	15 x 30 cm	Mound, light green leaves, blue bell-like flowers, sunny, well-drained soils.
Cerastium tomentosum Snow-in-summer	3	22 x 60 cm	Spreader, silver-grey, woolly leaves, white flowers, sunny well-drained locations.
Convallaria majalis Lily-of-the-Valley	3	22 x 30 cm	Spreader, smooth green leaves, white scented flowers, shade lover.
Coronilla varia Crown Vetch	4	.6 x 1 m	Spreader, green pinnate leaves, lilac-pink flowers, legume used for dry, steep banks, invasive. Cvs. Penngift, Emerald.
Dianthus Pinks	3	10 x 30 cm	Spreader, bluish linear leaves, white-red flowers, sunny, well-drained sites. Cvs. D. deltoides (pink flowers), D. Flashing Lights (Red)
Duchesnea indica Mock Strawberry	4	10 x 60 cm	Spreader, strawberry-like leaves, yellow flowers, sun or shade, invasive by runners and seeds.
Epimedium grandiflora Barrenwort	4	1 x 1 m	Spreader, glossy, green leaves, pink-red flowers, good cover in shade. Cvs. E. rubrum (red flowers), E. sulphureum (yellow flowers).

Name	Hardiness Zone	Height x Spread	Comments
Geranium Cranesbill	5	30 x 30 cm	Spreader, green divided leaves, white, blue or red flowers, good ground cover for sun or partial shade. Cvs. G. sanquineum (magenta flowers), G. macrorrhiza (pink), G. Johnson's Blue.
Hemerocallis Day-lily	2	1 x .3 m	Mound, grassy green leaves, yellow-crimson flowers, sunny, well-drained soils.
Hosta Plantain-Lilly	4	50 x 60 cm	Mound, heart-shaped green leaves, white-lilac flowers, shade to partial sun. Cvs. H. seiboldiana (large blue leaves), H. undulata (variegated leaves).
Lamiastrum g. variegatum Variegated Archangel	5	.1 x 1 m	Spreader, white and green striped leaves, yellow flowers, shade loving invasive.
Lamium maculatum Dead-nettle	5	20 x 60 cm	Carpet, silver striped leaves, mauve flowers, shade loving, moist site. Cvs. L. Chequers (pink flowers), L. m. alba (white), L. Beacon Silver (silver leaves).
Lysimachia nummularia Moneywort	4	30 x 60 cm	Spreader, green round leaves, yellow flowers, sun to partial shade. Cvs. L. m. aurea (golden leaves).
Nepeta fassenii Catmint	5	25 x 45 cm	Carpet, grey-green leaves, lavender blue flowers, sunny, well-drained sites. Cvs. N. Blue Wonder (blue flowers).
Phlox subulata Moss Pink	3	10 x 30 cm	Spreader, narrow green leaves, white-blue flowers, sunny, well-drained sites. Cvs. P. Emerald Blue, P. rosea (pink flowers), P. May Snow.
Potentilla r. flore plena Creeping Cinquefoil	3	15 x 30 cm	Spreader, green strawberry leaves, double yellow flowers, sunny well-drained sites, invasive by runners.
Pulmonaria angustifolia Lungwort	3	15 x 30 cm	Mound, silver spotted green leaves, red-blue flowers, sun or shade.
Saponaria ocymoides Rock soapwort	4	15 x 30 cm	Carpet, green leaves, pink flowers, sunny, well-drained soils.
Sedum Stonecrop	3	15 x 30 cm	Mound, grey-green leaves, pink-rose red flowers, full sun. Cvs. S. acre (yellow flowers, invasive), S. Autumn Joy (pink).
Stachys lanata Lambs-ear	5	10 x 30 cm	Carpet, grey woolly leaves, grey-white flowers, full sun in well-drained soils. Cvs. S. Silver Carpet non-flowering type.
Thymus serpyllum Mother-of-thyme	3	2.5 x 30 cm	Spreader, dark green leaves, pink-red flowers, sunny, well-drained sites. Cvs. T. albus (white flowers) T. lanuginosus (grey leaves).
Tiarella cordifolia Foam flower	5	15 x 30 cm	Carpet, green lobed leaves, creamy-white flowers, native cover for moist shady site.
Veronica Speedwell	4	15 x 30 cm	Carpet, green leaves, blue flowers, sunny, well-drained sites. Cvs. V. incana, silver-grey leaves.

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